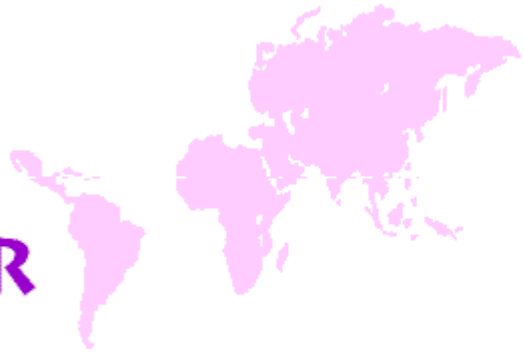
THIRD WORLD TRAVELER



Good Things Happening in Venezuela

by Michael Parenti

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Even before I arrived in Venezuela for a recent visit, I encountered the great class divide in that country. On my connecting flight from Miami to Caracas, I found myself seated next to an exquisitely dressed Venezuelan woman. Judging from her prosperous aspect, I anticipated that she would take the first opportunity to hold forth against President Hugo Chavez. Unfortunately, I was right.

Our conversation moved along famously until we got to the political struggle going on in Venezuela. "Chavez," she hissed, "is terrible, terrible." He is "a liar." He "fools the people" and is "ruining the country."

She owns an upscale women's fashion company with links to prominent firms in the United States. When I asked how Chavez has hurt her business, she said, "Not at all." But many other businesses, she quickly added, have been irreparably damaged as has the whole economy. She went on denouncing Chavez in sweeping terms, warning me of the national disaster to come if this demon continued to have his way.

Other critics I encountered in Venezuela shared this same mode of attack: weak on specifics, but strong in venom, voiced with all the ferocity of those who fear that their birthright (that is, their class advantage) is under siege because others below them on the social ladder are now getting a slightly larger slice of the pie.

In Venezuela over 80 percent of the population lives below the poverty level. Before Chavez, most of the poor had never seen a doctor or dentist. Their children never went to school, since they could not afford the annual fees. The neoliberal market "adjustments" of the 1980s and 1990s only made things worse, cutting social spending and eliminating subsidies in consumer goods. Successive Administrations did nothing about the rampant

corruption and nothing about the growing gap between rich and poor, the growing malnutrition and desperation.

Far from ruining the country, here are some of the good things the Chavez government has accomplished:

*** A land reform program designed to assist small farmers and the landless poor has been instituted-this past March a large landed estate owned by a British beef company was occupied by agrarian workers for farming purposes**

*** Education is now free (right through to university level), causing a dramatic increase in grade school enrollment**

*** The government has set up a marine conservation program and is taking steps to protect the land and fishing rights of indigenous peoples**

*** Special banks now assist small enterprises, worker cooperatives, and farmers**

*** Attempts to further privatize the state-run oil industry-80 percent of which is still publicly owned-have been halted and limits have been placed on foreign capital penetration**

*** Chavez kicked out U.S. military advisors and prohibited overflights by U.S. military aircraft engaged in counterinsurgency in Colombia**

*** "Bolivarian Circles" have been organized throughout the nation, neighborhood committees designed to activate citizens at the community level to assist in literacy, education, vaccination campaigns, and other public services**

*** The government hires unemployed men, on a temporary basis, to repair streets and neglected drainage and water systems in poor neighborhoods**

Then there is the health program. I visited a dental clinic in Chavez's home state of Barinas. The staff consisted of four dentists, two of whom were young Venezuelan women. The other two were Cuban men who were there on a one-year program. The Venezuelan dentists noted that in earlier times dentists did not have enough work. There were millions of people who needed treatment, but care was severely rationed by one's ability to pay. Dental care was distributed like any other commodity, not to everyone who needed it, but only to those who could afford it.

When the free clinic in Barinas first opened it was flooded with people seeking dental care. No one was turned away. Even opponents of the Chavez government availed themselves of the free service, temporarily putting aside their political aversions.

Many of the doctors and dentists who work in the barrio clinics (along with some of the clinical supplies and pharmaceuticals) come from Cuba. Chavez has also put Venezuelan military doctors and dentists to work in the free clinics. Meanwhile, much of the Venezuelan medical establishment is vehemently opposed to the free clinic program, seeing it as a Cuban communist campaign to undermine medical standards and physicians' earnings. That low-income people are receiving medical and dental care for

the first time in their lives does not seem to be a consideration that carries much weight among the more "professionally minded" practitioners.

I visited one of the government-supported community food stores that are located around the country, mostly in low income areas. These modest establishments sell canned goods, pasta, beans, rice, and some produce and fruits at well below market price, a blessing in a society with widespread malnutrition.

Popular food markets have eliminated the layers of middlepeople and made staples more affordable for residents. Most of these markets are run by women. The government also created a state-financed bank whose function is to provide low-income women with funds to start cooperatives in their communities.

There is a growing number of worker cooperatives. One in Caracas was started by turning a waste dump into a shoe factory and a T-shirt factory. Financed with money from the Petroleum Ministry, the coop has put about 1,000 people to work. The workers seem enthusiastic and hopeful.

Surprisingly, many Venezuelans know relatively little about the worker cooperatives. Or perhaps it's not surprising, given the near monopoly that private capital has over the print and broadcast media. The wealthy media moguls, all vehemently anti-Chavez, own four of the five television stations and all the major newspapers.

The person most responsible for Venezuela's revolutionary developments, Hugo Chavez, has been accorded the usual ad hominem treatment in the U. S. news media. An article in the San Francisco Chronicle described him as "Venezuela's pugnacious president." An earlier Chronicle report (November 30, 2001) quotes a political opponent who calls Chavez "a psychopath, a terribly aggressive guy." The London Financial Times sees him as "increasingly autocratic" and presiding over something called a "rogue democracy."

In the Nation (May 6, 2002), Marc Cooper-one of those Cold War liberals who nowadays regularly defends the U.S. empire-writes that the democratically-elected Chavez speaks "often as a thug," who "flirts with megalomania." Chavez's behavior, Cooper rattles on, "borders on the paranoiac," is "ham-fisted demagogy" acted out with an "increasingly autocratic style." Like so many critics, Cooper downplays Chavez's accomplishments and uses name-calling in place of informed analysis.

Other media mouthpieces have labeled Chavez "mercurial," "besieged," "heavy-handed," "incompetent," and "dictatorial," a "barracks populist," a "strongman," a "firebrand," and, above all, a "leftist." It is never explained what "leftist" means.

A leftist is someone who advocates a more equitable distribution of social resources and human services and who supports the kinds of programs that the Chavez government is putting in place. (Likewise a rightist is someone who opposes such programs and seeks to advance the insatiable privileges of private capital and the wealthy few.) The term "leftist" is frequently bandied about in the U. N. media, but seldom defined. The power of the label is in its remaining undefined, allowing it to have an abstracted built-in demonizing impact, which precludes rational examination of its political content.

Meanwhile Chavez's opponents, who staged an illegal and unconstitutional coup in April 2002 against the democratically elected government, are depicted in the U.S. media as champions of "pro-democratic" and "pro-West" governance. We are talking about the free-market plutocrats and corporate-military leaders of the privileged social order who killed more people in the 48 hours they held power in 2002 than were ever harmed by Chavez in his years of rule.

When one of these perpetrators, General Carlos Alfonzo, was hit with charges for the role he had played, the New York Times chose to call him a "dissident" whose rights were being suppressed by the Chavez government. Four other top military officers charged with leading the 2002 coup were also likely to face legal action. No doubt, they too will be described not as plotters or traitors who tried to destroy a democratic government, but as "dissidents," decent individuals who are being denied their right to disagree with the government.

President Hugo Chavez, whose public talks I attended on three occasions, proved to be an educated, articulate, remarkably well-informed and well-read individual. He manifests a sincere dedication to effecting some salutary changes for the great mass of his people, a person who in every aspect seems worthy of the decent and peaceful democratic revolution he is leading. Millions of his compatriots correctly perceive him as being the only president who has ever paid attention to the nation's poorest areas. No wonder he is the target of calumny and coup from the upper echelons in his own country and from ruling circles up north.

Chavez charges that the United States government is plotting to assassinate him. I can believe it.

Michael Parenti's recent books include Superpatriotism (City Lights) and The Assassination of Julius Caesar (New Press), which was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize. His forthcoming book, The Culture Struggle will be published by Seven Stories Press in the fall of 2005.

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